

Civility as a Spiritual Practice

Jewish tradition emphasizes kindness, graciousness, and respect to teach us to uphold the human ideal—and to promote good government.

BY ALAN MORINIS

These are dark days for the virtue of civility. Drivers on the freeway are aggressive and contemptuous, reality television celebrates and exploits backstabbing chatter, politicians berate one another with gleeful abandon and little regard for truth, and online cyber bullying and “flaming” have set new low standards for public interaction.

What can we do about this? Simply calling for more civility in public life has had little effect. Stronger medicine is needed.

Mussar, a millennium-old Jewish tradition of personal spiritual development based in the Torah, shines a unique light on the issue. From the Mussar perspective, civility is not just about considerate and respectful interaction; rather, it asks us to see the spiritual value and impact that arise from our speech and behavior. When we grasp the deeper importance of the issue, maybe we will be more strongly motivated as a community to work to end corrosive behavior that undermines the social fabric of society.

One of the primary spiritual principles in the Torah is the injunction “to walk in God’s ways” (Deuteronomy 28:7-9); that is, to model our individual characters on the Divine attributes revealed to us in the tradition. “Just as God is called merciful, so should you be merciful. Just as He is called gracious, so should you be gracious” (Sifrei Devarim

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11:22). The Talmud emphasizes kindly, caring actions that emulate the Divine: “As God clothes the naked [Adam and Eve], so you also should clothe the



naked. As God visited the sick [Abraham after his circumcision], so you also should visit the sick. As God comforted mourners [Isaac after the death of Abraham], so you also should comfort mourners. As God buried the dead [Moses], so you also should bury the dead” (*Sotah* 14a).

Thus, when we identify in God’s actions the qualities of mercy, loving-kindness, graciousness, generosity, and compassion and we then make an effort to develop those traits in ourselves, we become more merciful, loving, and generous people and thereby elevate ourselves as spiritual beings. By the same token, when we practice compassionate behaviors such as clothing the naked and comforting mourners, we walk in God’s ways and are elevated spiritually.

But can humans truly emulate “God’s qualities”? Are we really supposed to think that God has human-like qualities? Maimonides, the great 11th-

century Jewish thinker, writes: “They [the sages of the Talmud and midrash] do not mean to say that God really possesses *middot* [traits of character], but that He performs actions similar to those actions we may perform...[And] we ascribe to God the emotion which is the source of the act were we to perform it” (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 1:54). In other words, God doesn’t really have human-like characteristics, but we attribute to God the qualities that would be true of humans who act the way God acts.

Yet anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the Bible knows that ours is not a God of only mercy and tolerance. Our God shows anger and envy and yet we aren’t told, “As God is angry, so should you be angry. As the Divine is jealous, so should you be jealous.” Why not?

Maimonides addresses this question, saying, “We have shown why it suffices to mention only these out of all God’s acts, namely, because these are the ones required for good government of a country.”

This is a surprising perspective. Why doesn’t Jewish tradition simply encourage us to emulate the kindly, patient, and generous qualities we see in God’s behavior and avoid the harsher side of the Divine for the sake of our own spiritual elevation? Aren’t spiritually developed people simply bound to be more compassionate and kind, and less angry and envious?

No, say Maimonides and the Mussar teachers. There is nothing inherently negative about anger or envy, just as such qualities as patience or generosity

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